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See 1 of 4 in Brit (Agent 83/4)

Too Good to Be False

Where "The Great Race" tries to fool the audience and fails, another self-styled spoof, **AGENT 8 1/4**, succeeds in fooling itself, and the results are not at all unpleasant. It begins as a cheerfully nonsensical caricature of the James Bond genre, with intelligence colonel Robert Morley pressing an unsuspecting Dirk Bogarde into service as a spy. Bogarde has no idea what he's being paid for since Morley, who has no idea what he's doing, uses a British glass company for a front and sends his new man to Prague for "perfectly legitimate industrial espionage."

As the plot thickens and jells, Bogarde's adventures become less preposterous and more engrossing. The wackiness is still there—codes that won't work, microphones in flowerpots—but the mock hero becomes someone to care about and perspire with. His Czech Ninotchka, played by Sylva Koscina, is too beautiful and talented, Leo McKern is too convincing as her secret-policeman father, the locations (Italy, actually) are too handsome, Lukas Heller's script too literate, Ralph Thomas's direction too accomplished and Bogarde's performance too sympathetic to be dismissed as mere spoofery.

Quite simply, then, "Agent 8 1/4" falls victim to its own quality. It gets too good to sustain itself as farce or caricature, thereby violating its initial premise. The audience cannot obediently respond with peals of laughter when Morley bumbles back to ring down the curtain; the thrills that have gone before rang all too true.